

World

End of the line
for last steam
train in Africa

Ian Evans, page 47



Roma who fled violence in Belfast face poverty and despair back home

Romania

David Sharrock Batar

At the end of a potholed road lies the village to which a hundred Romanians are returning after fleeing racist attacks in Belfast and where their fear will soon turn to despair.

Twenty hours of journey time separate Belfast, via Dublin and Budapest, from Batar but, surveying the medieval conditions in which the Roma live here, one might do better to take as a measure of distance not years, nor even decades, but centuries.

On the farthest margins of the European Union a man's legs and arms were smeared with dirt as he toiled to make bricks from straw and mud to build another room on his home. It was, he said, to provide somewhere to sleep for the dozens of naked children. Some of them malnourished, all of them filthy — who were running and swooping gleefully through the scattered rubbish.

Elderly couples sat on upturned buckets and tired old horses pulled carts while older children rode scrap-salvaged bicycles. No sanitation, a rudimentary electricity supply and the background hum of hunger added hopelessness completed the picture.

Just how terrified must the Roma families in Belfast have been to choose this over their imperfect lives in Northern Ireland?

It is a question that, all week, has been troubling the few who have already arrived home.

Florin Fekete returned on Monday with his wife and two sons. "There is no work here. Life in Belfast was good, we had really good times but I could not risk my family's lives. I asked some of the ones who were attacking us, 'What do you have against us?'"

"The reply was, 'We hate you because you are gypsies'. But even though I am afraid, I want to go back. Is it safe now, do you think?"

A 21-year-old man and a 15-year-old boy have been charged in relation to the attacks, which began more than two weeks ago and which prompted the Romanians to seek sanctuary inside a south Belfast church. It has since had its windows smashed.

In spite of a personal appeal not to leave by Martin McGuinness, the Deputy First Minister, the Roma could not be persuaded by his argument that their tormentors were a "tiny unrepresentative group of racist criminals".

They moved on. Voices on local radio chat shows might, had they heard them, have convinced them they were right to do so: some callers said they should never have been in Belfast in the first place.

The cancer of sectarianism, which fuelled decades of violence, is now, as foreigners arrive in greater numbers, embracing racism. A report by the University of Ulster in 2007 made the astonishing claim that Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of



About a quarter of Batar's 5,300 inhabitants are Roma but they face discrimination here, too, from other groups

Minority report

10-12 million

number of Roma in Europe

75%

estimated number living in poverty

64%

of Roma children in Europe do not attend primary school

3,000

Roma living in Northern Ireland, 90 per cent from Romania

Source: Council of Europe, Open Society Institute, UNICEF

bigoted people in the Western world. That was supported by an Equality Commission study this week that found that nearly a quarter of people in the province object to having a migrant or a gay person as a neighbour.

In Romania, the images of the Roma families under police protection have elicited little comment. One journalist said: "It's not so important. People here don't have a lot of sympathy for the Roma."

In Oradea, a border city near the villages where the Roma live, people refused to even describe them as Romanians. "They are not like us — just look at them," said one smartly dressed woman.

Mr Fekete observed that his Government had done nothing to help them and that it was Northern Ireland's politicians who gave them temporary

secure housing and paid their fares home.

"The Belfast people were great while our own Government did nothing. We only go there to work because we are poor and here there is nothing for us. But we were attacked so we had to leave," he said.

What made Belfast such an attractive place? "Houses are cheap, we could rent them for £350 a month. Then we could earn £45 a day selling newspapers and working at a car wash. Our children could go to school and the churches were very good."

There has been traffic between Belfast and Batar for at least four years. A man called Virgil explained that the money the Romanian state pays for childcare — about £4 a month per child — would be saved up and used to pay for the journey. Once there,

and with an established extended family network in place, they sent money home.

The mayor of Batar, Bondar Gheorghe, said: "Belfast is good for Batar because they come home with enough money to buy houses. That way they achieve better relations with their neighbours and it helps to integrate them."

About a quarter of Batar's 5,300 inhabitants are Roma, a far higher percentage than the national 2.5 per cent of the population. The mayor said that since the collectivised farms of the communist era were dismantled there was no work in the village.

"Belfast has been important to our local economy. We would like to build stronger links. Perhaps politicians from Belfast could come and see how they have helped to improve life here."

One young man said his life would improve only if he could go back soon. Sitting on the porch of a tiny four-room bungalow where he must now live once more with his three siblings and parents, Lucas, 21, almost broke down as he explained how the leaving of Belfast had split up his family.

"There is no room here for all of us,



my wife will not sleep on the floor so she has gone back to her parents with our son," he said. "I cry often now because I want a better life, the life I saw people in Belfast living. But I was threatened by a man, who said he was going to kill me. When the attacks started three weeks ago I was so frightened that I bought us all tickets to fly home."

"But there is nothing here for us. All I want is to be able to work to make enough money so I can build a house for my family. You see how we live here — I feel so ashamed. That's why I want to go back."

Alexandru Alexe, a Bucharest-based civil rights activist, said: "What I saw in Belfast reminded me of Romania in the early 1990s, when the Roma parts of villages were burnt by other villagers."

"There was a lot of tension after the collapse of communism, which eased with the economic boom. But now we are in crisis I fear that the Roma may be victimised again."

"In Hungary a new paramilitary group is vowing to clear out the Roma and in Italy there was much violence last year. It starts with neo-Nazis but it doesn't take a lot to take it mainstream. Maybe Belfast is just the beginning."